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Capital's Rumor Mill: The Death of an Agent And the Talk It Started

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Special to The New York Times

WASHINGTON, Sept. 22 — The Senate Select Committee on Intelligence began last week trying to separate the truth from the rumors in a case that developed in that twilight world in Washington where intelligence, politics and journalism intersect.

Acting at the request of two committee members, Daniel Patrick Moynihan, Democrat of New York, and Malcolm Wallop, a Wyoming Republican, the committee staff started investigating allegations that in 1977 a senior official in the Carter Administration accidently exposed the identity of a Soviet official serving as a United States spy in Moscow, leading to the arrest and death of the agent, whose code name was Trigon.

If the charges are true, the case will be a serious political embarrassment. Even the existence of a preliminary Senate inquiry into the matter raises questions about the conduct of the Administration in a highly sensitive area.

For weeks, rumors have been circulating in the intelligence community about the exposure of Trigon. In public, officials have carefully avoided naming any individual suspected of unmasking the spy, but in private, intelligence analysts, Senate staff members and reporters all repeat the same name: David L. Aaron, deputy assistant to the President for national security affairs.

However, according to officials at the Central Intelligence Agency, which conducted its own investigation into the exposure of Trigon, there is no evidence to support the allegation that he was unmasked by Mr. Aaron.

Mr. Aaron declined to comment publicly on the case. Alfred Friendly Jr., spokesman for the National Security Council and White House associate press secretary, called the charges against Mr. Aaron "completely unfounded."

Deputy Attorney General Charles B. Renfrew said in an interview that the F.B.I. had investigated the charges against Mr. Aaron and "found them without any support of substance."

Mr. Renfrew said he had directed the F.B.I. to broaden its inquiry to determine whether there had been any other indiscretions or leaks of classified information by Mr. Aaron and that the F.B.I. had concluded there had not been.

How Washington Works

This is the story of how that unsubstantiated rumor became part of a Senate investigation. It is also a story of how Washington works. The sources were more than a score of intelligence officials, Senate staff members, White House aides and journalists.

There are different accounts about the origins of the Trigon case. According to one group of intelligence officials, Trigon was the code name for a cable clerk in the Soviet Foreign Ministry who was recruited by the C.I.A. when he was stationed in Argentina in the early 1970's. When Trigon returned to Moscow, by this account, he provided the C.I.A. with classified Soviet cable traffic.

The other, more widely accepted version is that Trigon was the code name for a higher-ranking Soviet official named Anatoly N. Filatov. In this version, Mr. Filatov, who was first recruited in either South America or the Middle East, returned to work at the Foreign Ministry in Moscow in 1973 and began supplying the United States with abundant intelligence information, some of considered very valuable by C.I.A. analysts.

Then, starting in about 1976, analysts began to question material coming from Trigon because it was not confirmed by other C.I.A. sources. According to intelligence officials, the C.I.A. suspected that Mr. Filatov had been discovered by the Soviet security service, the K.G.B., and had become a double agent.

Cable About Kissinger Arrives

In April 1977, after a period of silence, Mr. Filatov provided a copy of a cable to the Soviet Politburo from Moscow's Ambassador to Washington, Anatoly F. Dobrynin. In the cable, Mr. Dobrynin reported on a conversation with former Secretary of State Henry A. Kissinger, quoting Mr. Kissinger as being critical of the March 1977 bargaining position of President Carter in nuclear arms talks. Mr. Kissinger has vigorously denied ever making such remarks to the Soviet Ambassador.

When the microfilm of the cable reached C.I.A. headquarters outside Washington, most officials doubted its authenticity. But a small group of analysts argued that there was no reason for the Russians to embarrass Mr. Kissinger by planting false information. Eventually, a bitter dispute about the cable's authenticity developed.

Meanwhile, Trigon disappeared in Moscow. In 1978, the Soviet press reported that Mr. Filatov had been tried for treason and executed. Some C.I.A. officials doubt that report, believing that Trigon committed suicide.

How and when Mr. Filatov was uncovered remains unclear. His loss was considered a major blow to American intelligence operations, and the C.I.A. investigated extensively to try to pinpoint how he was exposed. In the investigation, C.I.A. officials said, an unsubstantiated rumor that Mr. Aaron had exposed Mr. Filatov by inadvertently mentioning his activities to a Rumanian diplomat at a Washington reception proved to be completely unfounded.

A C.I.A. Man Pursues Case

However, one official at the C.I.A. [illegible] was forced to resign from the C.I.A. after admitting that he had supplied copies of a top-secret agency report on the arms limitation talks to a staff aide of Senator Henry M. Jackson, according to intelligence officials. Mr. Jackson, Democrat of Washington, was a leading critic of the arms negotiations. Mr. Sullivan told friends he felt obliged to give Mr. Jackson the report because he thought it was being withheld by Adm. Stansfield M. Turner, Director of Central Intelligence, in an effort to suppress information damaging to the arms talks.

Reporters Are Told About Case

Mr. Sullivan went to work as a staff aide to Senator Lloyd Bentsen, Democrat of Texas, in 1979 and later joined the staff of Senator Gordon J. Humphrey, Republican of New Hampshire.

Earlier this year, Mr. Sullivan began calling reporters to tell them about the Trigon case. These conversations, according to several of the reporters, followed the unwritten rules of Washington journalism when sensitive information is being offered by a source. Mr. Sullivan said he would provide information on the condition that he not be identified by name or position in any article.

Staff aides for several other senators, including Jesse Helms, Republican of North Carolina, also called reporters about the Trigon case, suggesting that they call Mr. Sullivan for a briefing.

Several reporters said they were now willing to say that Mr. Sullivan had talked to them because they felt the information he provided was misleading. Concerned about their own future contacts with officials, however, these reporters asked not to be identified.

Sullivan Denies Giving Information

They said that Mr. Sullivan had described the history of the Trigon case, including his role in it, and had reported that Mr. Aaron was suspected of having exposed Mr. Filatov.

In an interview with The New York Times this month, Mr. Sullivan denied that he had ever discussed the Trigon case with any reporters except for a brief conversation earlier this month with Charles Mohr of The Times. Mr. Sullivan said that conversation dealt only with previously published material.

"I am not involved in this matter," Mr. Sullivan said. "I am fully conscious of the secrecy contract I signed with the C.I.A. and have religiously abided by it."

The first major article about Trigon appeared in the July 21 issue of Newsweek on the eve of the Republican National Convention. David Martin, who wrote it, declined to discuss his sources.

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